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Conservation as Experience

The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela marks the end of the long pilgrimage journey of the Camino de Santiago. Known in English as the Way of Saint James, it was, during the Middle-Ages, one of the most important Christian pilgrimages; a route in which plenary indulgence could be earned and thus salvation could be brought somewhat closer. Traditionally the route started at the pilgrim's home, and took one of many dozens of paths leading to the shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great. Today, a lot of people still follow one of these routes in search of spiritual guidance, however the beautifully suggestive paths and lanes, combined with the hauntingly redolent pastoral landscape makes it popular with cyclists, hikers and organised tour parties.

Their journeys are vastly different. Serious pilgrims will contest that salvation cannot be found within an afternoon's stroll along a country path, despite the quiet rustic atmosphere, and that without full engagement with the hardships of the journey, without the pain and frustration of long hours of walking, and the solitude created by the disconnection from contemporary society, the experience lacks the force of revelation and true authenticity. Despite this many people believe that the activity is worthwhile, that a short interruption from the frenzy of modern life and the experience of treading on the same path that countless pilgrims have stepped upon before can create a meaningful and treasured undertaking.

The pursuit of new and interesting experiences is a valuable way of spending precious time and money. Experience design is a fast growing sector within the design industry. There are a number of different yet related terms that describe this move away from the design of objects to the choreographing of encounter and adventure, these include: user experience design, experience-driven design, and experience-based design. What is interesting about these is that they exploit the idea that the pastime is creatively composed, it is manoeuvred and directed to provide the optimally authentic experience.

Experience as a Pursuit

Today we live in a society in which most of the developed world has sufficient, or even a surfeit of things. This disenchantment with the primacy of the object, combined with a distrust of the digital, (in an age of universal knowledge, fake news, and truth that is not truth) means that the need to pursue what is considered as an authentic experience typifies the attitude of much of the contemporary western population. It has become apparent that many people no longer need an excess of objects. This attitude is epitomised by the Scandinavian concept of Hygge or decluttering, which suggests that happiness is not to be found within possessions but rather in the company of friends, and that time spent with other people is paramount in the pursuit of happiness. This is highly popular idea within the population of the early twenty-first century, note the rise of the Slow-Movement, whether this is Slow-Food, Slow-Travel and ultimately the Slow-City, it is led by people who want to deliberately slow down the pace of life and enjoy the experience of time well spent. Perhaps the over-familiarity that is developed by mass-construction and digital replication means that many people are seeking a more simple life, one which connects with the real and authentic, that is not driven by the need to acquire possessions, but having fewer more valuable things combined with real and genuine pursuits. These tangible and intangible activities and pastimes include a massive preoccupation with tradition, culture and legacy, that is, old buildings, situations and places; it is of course referred to as the heritage industry.

But what does authentic mean, especially in the charged and somewhat controversial domain of the conservation of the traditional encounter. The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela is undergoing an all-embracing conservation. Extensive cleaning is being conducted, and structural repairs made. But crucially, the building is being made suitable for the expected increase in visitors, some of whom have travelled across extensive landscapes, others have arrived much more easily. Yet all of them want to experience the feeling of having arrived at a place that contains great history, that embodies the events of countless generations, and thus they can participate in the traditions of hundreds of years. But, of course, the needs of the twenty-first century tourist are definitely unlike those of the previous visitors. Different expectations connected to the provision of facilities, health and safety, lighting and environmental comfort, and of course, interaction with the building divides the historic from the present.

What is the approach that the cathedral should take to such circumstances? The need for an authentic experience is understood, but what authenticity means is much more ambiguous. Conservation plays an important role within the wider process of development and change in the existing built environment. Inevitably there is a conflict between the aims and ideals of the conservationist and those of the architect or designer who is to transform the building to make it fit for new users. The goals of one group do not necessarily correspond with those of the other; indeed it could be argued that that they do not even overlap.

The fundamental divergence in the two approaches is a continual source of disagreement within the profession. The conservationist may want to keep the building or monument in the exact condition that it was found in, while the architect or designer will possibly expect to make massive changes to facilitate the new users of the building. The situation is further complicated by the contemporary expectation that the narrative of the building should be exposed. All buildings have an interesting story to tell, to be exposed and retold within the adaptation. How can the architect and the conservationist come to an agreement about which period of history is to be shown, how much is to be conserved, exactly how much is to be let go and how this is to be achieved. Inevitably some sort of compromise must be reached.

Conservation

Existing buildings provide a sense of connection with the previous ages. They reinforce the relationship that those who dwell in a place have with it and they can become part of the collective memory of a society. Our perception of the past is very much based upon our reading of these buildings. The conservation of such buildings is a complex process that combines the need to preserve as much of the existing structure as possible with a new, and often conflicting, function. It is a somewhat controversial subject, not just in the manner in which it is carried out, but also the selection of the buildings to be conserved. Attitudes towards the subject are continuously changing and it promises to become more difficult as the need for sustainable redevelopment becomes greater and our attitudes towards the past are reassessed.

The conservation of architecture is really a Modern concept; it is bound up with ideas of value and worth. (Jokilehto 1999) Buildings and monuments are valued for their historical age and their aesthetic appeal. Both aspects are highly contentious. It is questionable whether a structure should be valued just because it is old, while aesthetic significance is directly connected with the culture that is making the assessment and is thus subject to the whims of that society. A very sad example of this conflict between historical and artistic value and the culture

of the society that is making the assessment is the destruction of Penn State Railway Station.

When Pennsylvania Station opened in New York in 1910, it was widely praised for its majestic architecture. It was constructed by the New York architectural practice, McKim, Mead and White from pink granite in the Beaux-Arts style, with a huge colonnade wrapping around the exterior. The main waiting room, which was inspired by the Roman Baths of Caracalla was then the largest indoor space in the city at almost block and a half long with vaulted glass windows soaring over a sun-drenched chamber. There are many freely available historical images of this incredibly theatrical space that depict the sheer drama and excitement that was then contained within rail travel. Beyond the waiting room, the trains emerged from below the ground to deposit passengers on an extraordinary top-lit steel framed concourse. By the late 1950s with the advent of cheap air travel and high quality highways, the attraction of the station was dwindling. Apparently the Pennsylvania Railroad could not even afford to keep the station clean. In 1962 plans were revealed to demolish the terminal and build entertainment venue Madison Square Garden on top of it. The new train station would be entirely underground. Despite massive protests, most notably from the architecture critic and theoretician Jane Jacobs (1916-2006), the station was demolished. However, the sheer outrage was a major catalyst for the architectural preservation movement in the United States. In 1965, the New York Landmarks Law was passed, which helped save the Grand Central Terminal and more than 30,000 other buildings from a similar fate. Ironically, since the demolition of Penn Station, train ridership has grown tenfold in the USA. The new station, an oppressive tangle of subway lines and commuter railways, is now the busiest terminal in the country. Thus the station was not sufficiently valued by the society that demolished it, and yet today given the massive shift in attitudes towards the existing environment, we consider this attitude as wanton destruction.

Conservation is the general term that covers the process of upkeep, preservation and maintenance, but the subject can be more finely divided. The different aspects are based very much upon the balance between the active conservation of the structure and its productive adaptation. Preservation is the category in which the conservationist has the most control; it is the highly intricate process of assessing the worth of the existing and safeguarding its continual existence. Renovation generally refers to the process of updating a building to make it fit for use, but not generally making extreme changes, so for example the services may be improved, things such as the plumbing may be updated, the electricity distribution improved and Wi-Fi installed. This is not a new approach; indeed at the very end of the nineteenth century, Somers Clarke introduced electric light into Sir Christopher Wren's magnificent St Pauls Cathedral in London. Ten years later he also installed a hot-water heating system using a series of pipes that ran in large channels beneath the crypt floor and along the walls of the upper gallery; something that made the building vastly more habitable for the nineteenth century congregation. (Schofield 2016:177). Interestingly these actually replaced the Gurney Stoves that had been placed in the crypt in 1868 by the then Cathedral Surveyor, Francis Penrose. This incredibly crude system encouraged the movement of warm moist air through convection. The stoves were installed in the crypt and several holes were cut directly into the vaults of the crypt above them, this allowed hot air to simply drift up into the cathedral. The holes were quite crudely covered with cast-iron grates. (Schofield 2016:109)

The practice of restoration is possibly the most controversial of all conservation practices, as it could be thought to be the one that really contains the least

authenticity. The building will be returned to a chosen historical condition, a moment in time will be selected from somewhere within the past life of the building, and the structure artificially returned to that state. This is considered to be inauthentic because it is neither true to the original building, in that the pristine condition now depicted may never have actually existed, nor is it true to the contemporary period that the building now exists within. The patina of time is lost, and so it denies both the present and the past. Restoration is really a mixture of preservation and renovation, and it has been condemned as a practice since the middle of the nineteenth century as something that, because it did not maintain sharp separation between historical periods, violated the authenticity.

Adaptation is the process of unashamedly changing the building, of making it fit for new users with distinct expectations in a different time. The practice is also called remodelling and re-use. The (interior) architect will normally make a thorough reading of the building and thus have a complete understanding of the character, structure and context before embarking on a series of sometimes-irreversible changes.

The Search for Authenticity

The conservation lobby had its beginnings in the Anti-Scrape Movement and especially the book *Contrasts*, which was written in 1836 by A.W.N. Pugin (1812-1852) when he was just 24 years old. This was a somewhat revolutionary book, dealing not with proportion and construction as most previous books on architecture had (think Vitruvius or Palladio), but it was a manifesto; a social programme that redefined architecture as a moral force imbued with political and religious meaning (think Le Corbusier). Pugin condemned the mixture of improvement and restoration that violated the authenticity of old buildings. He considered that authenticity was something that could only be achieved by maintaining a clear separation between old and new.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), was one of the most outspoken and influential advocates for the formation of a conservation society. He argued that identity could be found in the pastimes and customs, in the vernacular and within the monuments that already exist. He felt that the authenticity lay within the age of an object and that the authenticity of a building or indeed a piece of furniture or a city, rested within its historic style. He railed against the practice of repairs and even adjustments that were carried out in the accurate historic style of the original structure. Thus it became impossible to ascertain the difference between the old and the new; this he regarded as one of the great deceptions, akin to a lie. The historic patina of time, that is the exposed narrative or story of the piece, imbued within the object great authenticity.

'It is in becoming memorial or monumental that a true perfection is attained by civil and domestic buildings... the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones nor in its gold. It is in its age.' (Pevsner 1980: 50)

Ruskin felt that imperfection was essential to life, it was an indication of progress and change. The Arts and Crafts movement under the mantle of William Morris (1834-1896) in particular, also recognised that the actual material oldness of the object was of the utmost importance. Morris combined Ruskin's anti-Modern passion with the romantic concept of the value of honest labour to create an artistic movement inspired by egalitarianism and the vernacular. Morris was instrumental in the formation of SPAB (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 1877), which was established in response to the work of Victorian architects whose enthusiasm for what he regarded as harmful restoration caused

irreparable damage. The SPAB Manifesto was written by William Morris, Philip Webb and other founder members in 1877, and although produced in response to the conservation problems of the 19th century, the organisation are still highly active and the Manifesto has been extended to provide protection to all times and styles, and as such still remains the basis for the Society's work. It contains this plea:

'to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands...'

It is interesting to observe how far this concept of what is important has progressed in the twenty first century. A fine illustrative example of this is of course the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, which is as stated, undergoing a massive amount of conservation work. The building is being completely cleaned and structural repairs are being conducted, this includes rectifying the mistakes that were really quite recently including the replacement of the far too heavy concrete roof. This will ensure that the building is fit for use for many generations.

It is the main gate, or Portal of Glory (Pórtico da Gloria) that is especially pertinent to this discussion. This Romanesque portico was once the main gate to the cathedral and dates back to the consecration of the building in 1211. Although it is now contained behind a protective eighteenth century Baroque façade, the once polychromatic archway is elevated at the top of a flight of stairs, and was designed so that the pilgrims could see it from afar as they entered the Cathedral Square. The tympanum was originally brightly painted, predominantly with the most precious and expensive colour, ultramarine blue; a colour already associated with holiness, humility, virtue, and especially with the Virgin Mary. Over the next millennium the façade was repainted a number of times, and the decoration was a clear expression of what possessed value and worth in that day; and as blue paint became more ubiquitous, so gold was used.

The objective of the present-day conservation work is to clean the sculptures, remove the grease and dirt that the city has placed upon it, and thus expose the patina of time. Traces of the earlier paintwork are still attached to the statues and these have been allowed to remain, but really the façade has become a study of the pure three-dimensional beauty of the figures. On no account will the entrance be repainted.

Image 1 and image 2

The exposure of the age is important, as is the revelation of the layers of history as shown in the fragments of paintwork that still cling to the crevices and folds, combined with the weathered stonework that is being shown. As in previous times, the most precious material has been used to convey the worth of the revered sculpture, and in the twenty first century, that is time. It is our most precious commodity, it is the thing that we most commonly waste, and testament to the preciousness of time, is the rise in the need in the Western World for experiences rather than possessions. The present day contemporary pursuit of 'art and form' through the application of subjective feeling fuels the tourism industry. As more of our basic needs are met, we increasingly expect sophisticated experiences that are emotionally satisfying and meaningful. These

experiences will not be simple products. They will be complex combination of products, services, spaces and information. (Svabo, Shanks 2015: 26)

Human labour is the most expensive element of any work of conservation, therefore to show the consideration for any precious piece of art, the longer, more deep and labour intensive the process, then greater is the inherent value of the object. This representation of the life of the façade shows how subjective the artistic evaluation of any ancient monument is. The precious blue paint and the valuable gold leaf are no longer regarded as the most treasured material. The fragments of these combined with the patina of time are the prized beyond anything else. A century ago this concept would have seemed barmy, but now it is the prevalent attitude.

Conclusions

Over a century ago, Alois Riegl argued of development: 'We call historical all things that once were and are no longer'. (Riegl 1903: 70) However, within contemporary society, history is now regarded as a progressive activity. Indeed conservation is often described as a: future oriented movement focussing on the past.

Today authenticity of an object is derived not from the original or eternal values, but from the present-day reception of that object. While the artistic value is not attributed a transient or timeless status but it is a present day concern. Thus it is the historical significance of an object that is valued. Its worth is not depend upon the quality of the object, the skill with which it was constructed or the materials that it is made from. Value is simply attributed through age. Reproduction is frowned upon and pastiche is ridiculed, because the sense of time and history are regarded as lost when these techniques are employed. Blemishes show age, something that Ruskin was much in favour of. The patina that comes with custom and use that appears after many generations have handled an object is considered to be of much greater value than something that reproduces the original piece or object however well made.

This contemporary attitude towards conservation means that there would be a horrified reaction to a proposal to repaint the tympanum of the Portal of Glory in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The integrity of this once highly decorated sculptured infill over the doorway is preserved through the visual knowledge that it is very old, that it has survived as cultures and societies change and has remained constant through the ages. But of course it hasn't remained constant; the visual impression of the tympanum has changed as society's attitude towards what is precious has altered. It was blue when that was the treasured colour, it was covered with gold when that was the most valuable material, and now that time is our most cherished commodity, it has been painstakingly cleaned to expose the sense of history inherent within it. Conservation is a constant search for authenticity, and as attitudes towards what is regarded as authentic evolve, so have methods and theories of conservation.

Experience design can be described as the choreography of temporary and shifting engagements across a series of design disciplines. Conservation is just one of those disciplines and as such has embraced the contemporary need for the seemingly historical authenticity within such experiences. These are recreational activities that occur in places that are imbued with a sense of time and history, but which embrace the contemporary attitude towards what is precious. Today time is the most precious commodity of all, and testament to this is the need to experience, to live, to engage with different and worthwhile pursuits.

However, this preciousness is also exposed in the attitude towards the conservation of the existing environment, where again it is the precious time needed to laboriously clean and repair the building that is valued, thus contemporary design and conservation practices pursue a similar authenticity.

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